Report Back - Regional Energy Accord Young Leaders Dinner - Riverina + Murray

Where: Romano's Hotel, Wagga
When: Thursday, 27 November 2025
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This summary captures "what we heard" during a young leader's dinner in Wagga Wagga the evening after the Regional Energy Accord Roundtable. Seven young people, aged 17–30, joined Cathy McGowan AO (former Federal Independent Member for Indi), Sabiene Heindl (CEO, The Energy Charter) and Rachel Whiting (CEO, RDA Riverina) to reflect on their experiences, barriers and aspirations in the region.

Across the night, a clear picture emerged: **The people who will live longest with the energy transition must help shape it.**

1. "We're on board, we just want it done right"

The strongest message of the night was uncomplicated: young people support the shift to renewable energy. There was no culture war, no generational backlash. The energy transition wasn't framed as something to resist; it was something to get on with.

> *"We're on board. We just want it done right."*

For the group, "done right" meant respect for place, people and Country and a much more honest conversation about who benefits, who loses and what's left behind. One young participant framed it bluntly:

> *"I think if the Regional Energy Accord can help, there can be a sort of mutually beneficial relationship between the powers that be in the energy and transition space and young people, like both sides can use each other to get what they want in Wagga Wagga."*

The conversation kept returning to fairness, visibility and shared benefit – not whether renewables should happen, but how they happen and for whom.

A story from near Hay cut through the abstract language and landed the point. On one family's land, a scene for Mad Max was filmed on a portion of the country. The film crew damaged a significant area of land for just a few seconds of screen time.

> *"They destroyed so much land for like 15 seconds of the movie. And in my point of view, I go, we were okay with that. So what's the difference between using that same bit of land that you destroyed for a movie that in 50 years might not matter that much, but if you use that same bit of land to put it towards something that in 50 years would still be productive?"*

The point was not that development is painless – but that communities have already accepted forms of damage that serve someone else's story. If they can accept that for a blockbuster, why not for something that could keep power bills down, support local jobs and reduce climate risk? But the line was clear: **if you're going to do it, do it properly.**

A young indigenous voice at the table was very matter-of-fact about change:

> *"We've had to adapt our whole lives. Change isn't new to us. But if you're going to do it, do it properly."*

Similarly, another participant spoke about their family farm's experience with incomplete or uneven benefits, like the half-fixed road that ended exactly where a project needed it:

> *"They fixed the road up to their site… and we're still driving through potholes."*

These stories weren't complaints about renewables; they were articulations of fairness. Young people want shared benefits, real partnership, and visible care for the places they live in.

The generational tension that often appears in energy conversations, fear, loss and resistance didn't land in this group. The young people around the table weren't holding those emotions. They simply wanted to get on with it, but in a way that respects Country, people and local life.

2. Long-term must mean lifetimes, or we'll be left with the consequences

A participant sharpened the group's perspective on timeframes. They challenged the assumption that 10–20 years is "long term":

> *"Twenty years isn't long-term. That's a funding cycle. Things get set up, everyone pays attention… then the funding runs out, and we're left with the consequences."*

The group's message was simple and blunt: **If you're going to reshape a region, you have to think in lifetimes, not program windows.**

"Long term" should mean their children and grandchildren are better off, not that a project has reached the end of its depreciation schedule.

They spoke about the risk of being left with stranded assets, stranded landscapes, and stranded skills:

"Short-term sustainability fixes aren't enough. Don't just build something that works for 10 or 20 years and then we're stuck. Do the work so it still makes sense in 50."

For the Regional Energy Accord, this translates directly into design questions:

- How do commitments endure beyond election cycles and funding rounds?
- What benchmarks and milestones are set at 5, 10, 20 and 50 years?
- Who carries responsibility for maintenance, remediation and long-term stewardship?

Young people around the table were not asking for vague aspirations; they wanted clear, long-horizon commitments that someone can be held to.

3. On the fireground and the farm: living with the transition up close

One of the most powerful perspectives came from a young Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteer who lives on a farm outside Wagga Wagga, on a dirt road that now hosts a major new energy substation. Her story brought together three realities at once:

- Deep attachment to land and community
- The practical impacts of big infrastructure
- And a surprisingly pragmatic view of what "compromise" can look like.

She spoke about the RFS as the heartbeat of the local community, neighbours turning up for each other when fire hits, the way everyone "gets around it" when there's smoke on the horizon. For her, community is not an abstract idea; it's who you stand beside when the paddock is burning. Now, that same community is adjusting to heavy vehicles, noise and dust associated with the substation on her road.

> *"Actually, the transmission provider is building a power station on my road… I can see why the neighbours are upset. They had to go to court. They didn't want to give it up. The road's worse. There are more trucks. It's noisier."*

At the same time, she sees a real possibility:

> *"It's not like a bad thing, but it's something we have to work with now… We can install more solar on our farm and earn more money from it. You making this small sacrifice can have such a positive impact on some young people."*

She wasn't romantic about it. She wanted the road properly fixed ("We're still hitting potholes with harvest trucks"), wanted the impacts acknowledged and wanted standards that made sense on the ground. But she refused a simple "for or against" frame:

> *"There definitely has to be a compromise on both sides. I can see it from both sides: yes, it will bring a positive influence, but it also takes away these people's land. So there needs to be real compromise for both parties. Sometimes that's just not there."*

From a Regional Energy Accord perspective, her story does three important things:

- It rebuts the idea that young regional people are simply 'anti-development.'
- She can see the benefits and she is prepared to shoulder some of the inconvenience – if there is honesty, standards and shared benefit.
- It reframes "impact" as something lived, not theoretical. For her, impact is not a stakeholder matrix; it's the road she drives on, the trucks that pass her farm, the way substation workers do (or don't) connect with local sport and community life.

4. Young people are committed to regional Australia, but systems don't always let them stay, move or belong

Young people are committed to regional Australia, and they are the ones who will live with the consequences.

One of the clearest truths from the dinner was this: **Young people want to build their lives in regional Australia.**

They are not waiting to "escape." They care deeply about their towns, their land, their families and their communities. They want to volunteer, lead, contribute and stay connected to the place.

But commitment alone isn't enough when the systems around them make staying or moving between regional areas unnecessarily difficult.

> *"I love it here. I want to stay. That's always been my plan."*

Staying is harder than it should be

Even when young people want to remain in their hometowns, the pathways are often unclear or unsupported:

- Limited local study options
- Schools pushing students toward cities
- Employers overlooking regional youth rather than training them
- Tight housing markets
- Social networks that are hard to enter unless you've "always been here"

One participant captured it plainly: *"I didn't leave because I wanted to. I left because I couldn't find my place."*

Moving between regional communities can be even harder

Several participants shared that shifting from one regional town to another, for study, work or family, can be socially tougher than moving to a capital city.

> "*Moving from Hay to Wagga was harder than moving to Darwin*."

This matters. The transition will require a mobile regional workforce: apprentices, technicians, scientists, emergency volunteers, landholders and community workers. But mobility only works if regional communities welcome newcomers into the heart of local life.

Belonging is strong, but not automatic

Young people around the table expressed a deep attachment to regional culture and identity:

- RFS volunteering
- Family farming
- Youth taskforces
- Cultural responsibilities
- Sport, clubs and community networks

This connection is real.

But belonging can still feel fragile if local systems: schools, councils, employers, community organisations, unintentionally exclude those who weren't "born-and-bred." *"I'm beginning to realise my lived experience counts, even if I wasn't born here."*

And here is the critical insight: A 17-year-old at this dinner will be 37 in twenty years, still younger than almost every voice currently driving the energy transition.

This is the generation that will absorb the economic, social and environmental consequences of the decisions being made now. They will live with:

- The projects we approve
- The roads we half-fix or fully fix
- The skills pipelines we build or fail to build
- The landscapes we reshape
- The stranded assets we leave behind
- The trust we strengthen or erode
- The partnerships we honour, or don't.

By 2045, today's 17-year-old will be raising a family, running a farm, managing a business, leading an RFS brigade, working in a REZ or sitting on a council. And the agreements we write now, the commitments we make, the benefits we share or don't share, will have landed squarely in their lives.

That is why their voice matters.

This is the generation with the most skin in the game.

And elevating their voice is not just respectful, it is refreshing, honest and strategically necessary for regional Australia.

What this means for the Regional Energy Accord

The young leaders' dinner revealed something essential: **If young people are going to live with the consequences of the energy transition, they must help shape it.** A credible Regional Energy Accord can:

1. Elevate youth at every Roundtable

Not as a token voice, as a core voice. Every region, every workshop, every major discussion needs young people at the table with real influence.

2. Embed youth in the Regional Energy Accord's design and governance

Create structured roles: youth co-design panels, cadetships and a national Youth Advisory Group, so young people help set the rules, not just react to them.

3. Make fairness visible

Young people judge credibility by what they see on the ground: full roads, local jobs first, commitments honoured. The Regional Energy Accord will be measured the same way.

The young RFS volunteer, the 17-year-old deciding whether to stay, and the youth worker from Hay aren't asking for a perfect transition. They're asking for a future-focused one.

> *"This is our future. We want it to work, for us and for the region."*